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ABSTRACT

Several ideas are presented as a rationale for the existence of research teams in master's level counseling programs. Research teams provide master's level counseling students with a heightened sense of awareness, value of, and interest in the process of inquiry, development of meaningful research questions, and testing of hypotheses. Students are allowed the opportunity to work closely with faculty in a manner that would not otherwise occur. Productive research team activities that result in professional presentation and/or publications enhance trainees' vitae in a manner that increases their competitiveness for future employment or postgraduate training experiences. Students become aware of the complexity of working collaboratively with colleagues. Participation on research teams enhances students' critical thinking skills by engaging in brainstorming activities around a problem area; hearing multiple perspectives of a problem; honing meaningful research questions; and solving typical research glitches. Faculty have the opportunity to enhance students' self-efficacy by instilling a sense that their work can make a difference in the profession. Research team activities allow for self-evaluation and introspection by the student. This paper describes two models for structuring such training experiences and presents the outcomes of this training opportunity over a 4-year period of implementation. (Contains one table and nine references.) (MKA)

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Research Teams in Masters Counseling Programs?

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Research Teams in Masters Counseling Programs?

Abstract

The paper presents a rationale for the existence of research teams in masters level counseling programs, describes two models for structuring such training experiences, and presents the outcomes of this training opportunity over a four year period of implementation.

Research Teams in Masters Counseling Programs?

The evolution of faculty-led research teams within some doctoral level counseling programs is one systemic strategy of providing interested trainees with an additional opportunity for research experience and scholarship prior to the required dissertation. Leaders within the profession of Counseling Psychology have directly associated early research participation with many positive outcomes associated directly with supporting and guiding ongoing engagement in research activities (i.e., increased interest in research, higher value in doing research, increased research self-efficacy, and increased scholarship productivity) (Gelso, Betz, Helms, Patton, Super, & Wampold, 1988; Royalty & Reising, 1986; Wampold, 1986). The concept of faculty-led research teams is one response to the long-standing recommendation in the literature for training programs to provide trainees with experiences, beyond the textbook, that result in research proficiency (Gelso, 1979; Betz, 1986; Gelso, Mallinckrodt, & Judge, 1996; Kahn & Scott, 1997). It has been concluded by many in the profession that doctoral level trainees will directly benefit from early involvement in research in collaboration with others.

In addition, to the development of a heightened awareness, value of, and interest in the process of inquiry, development of meaningful research questions, and testing of hypotheses, there are many other important non-research related positive outcomes of participation on research teams. First, students are allowed the opportunity to work closely with faculty in a manner that would not occur otherwise. Consequently, letters of recommendation will have more depth because faculty have more stimuli to which they might respond. Second, productive research team activities that result in professional presentation and/or publications enhance trainees' vitas in a manner that increases their competitiveness for future employment or postgraduate training experiences. Third, students become aware of the complexity of working

collaboratively with colleagues having shared interest, but will different levels of competencies, different perspectives and different levels of 'behavioral' commitment versus 'verbal' commitment toward a common goal. This experience is critical in professional development that increases personal competency in developing and maintaining effective working alliances with colleagues in spite of differences in a number of areas and knowing when the alliances must be severed. Interpersonal problem-solving skills have the opportunity to be enhanced in these work teams that will be beneficial in all work environments.

Fourth, participation on research teams enhances students' critical thinking skills by engaging in: brainstorming activities around a problem area; hearing multiple perspectives of a problem; honing meaningful research questions; problem-solving research glitches that are typical within the selection of measures, data collection, etc. This enhanced level of critical thinking allows participants a sense of professional empowerment that questions and tests what has been accepted, supported through past empirical examination with other populations, or assumed to be a truth without question or empirical support. Not only would these skills be critical in future research activities, but as a practitioner as well. Research team members' enhanced level of critical thinking should also translate into an ability to: generate multiple perspectives of client issues; assist the client in generating a greater number of alternatives toward problem resolution; and have greater flexibility in attending to interpersonal collisions that occur within therapeutic relationships.

Fifth, in these relationships, faculty have the opportunity to enhance students' self-efficacy by instilling a sense that their work can make a difference in the profession that is worthy of others' attention. This sense of feeling confident in what one's has to offer another may also

transfer in a comfort and patience with the process of inquiry and outcomes, in general, would certainly be an asset during first sessions with clients and during intake interviews.

Fifth, research team activities allows for students to have an opportunity for self-evaluation and introspection about the role that they 'naturally' assume among their peers (i.e., leader-follower, abstract thinker-concrete thinker, conceptualizer-worker, etc.). Trainees can, then, reevaluate their comfort with this role and decide if this is the role they would like to maintain with colleagues. Sixth, research team participation allows the opportunity for a sense of personal and professional validation that can only come with association with a group effort that results in a well-received product that is worthy of presentation, distribution, and/or publication within the professional arena. Opportunities to develop working alliances with members of the profession outside of the program who share one's interest are more apt to occur during conference attendance and conference presentations. Such activities allow for greater possibilities for professional networking and visibility within the field.

Within doctoral training programs, opportunities for research team participation has the potential to mean much more for trainees' professional development than the development of proficiency as a researcher. However, at this time, many masters level trainees who would also significantly benefit from the possible outcomes indicated above do not have the same opportunities for involvement. Acknowledging the importance of participation in research to some degree, some masters programs do have a thesis option, however, many do not consider the development of 'scholarship mindedness' as an essential component of the training of masters level professionals. Masters level trainees, who represent the largest group of mental health service deliverers in this country and whose professional development would certainly be enhanced by research team participation, are typically not provided the option. Terminal masters

degree counseling programs train thousands of students each year by preparing students for jobs requiring degrees within counseling or related fields (Gordon, 1990), however, graduates are assumed that they will automatically acquire the critical competencies indicated above on the job after graduation.

There are several reasons, beyond those indicated above, that all masters level trainees should have the same option to participate in research teams as doctoral trainees. First, masters level training programs feed doctoral programs. Masters level trainees who have multiple opportunities for research experiences would be most 'ready' for doctoral training and additional research activities. In addition, masters level research experiences that result in professional presentation or publications would make co-authors' and co-presenters' more competitive in the application process for doctoral training. Second, given that most masters level trainees will receive terminal degrees with no wish to pursue doctoral training, this may be the last opportunity for higher education to infuse a sense of the meaningfulness of inquiry and testing of hypotheses. Limited knowledge that only allows practitioners competence in interpreting professional journal articles, but does not teach them to question and 'test' can be dangerous knowledge. Third, to model a separateness between practice and research may assist in maintaining a rift that often results in empirical research that is totally unrelated to practice and 'intuitive' practice that is totally unrelated to empirical research (Gelso, 1979). This rift can be a travesty to the profession as well as to the clientele to which we are ethically bound to provide effective interventions for presenting problems.

The authors of this paper strongly believe that at least providing an opportunity for participation on research teams is one strategy to enhance the professional development of masters level trainees. Given that a preponderance of mental health services are provided by

masters level professionals, it seems reasonable that all masters level training would emphasize curriculum and professional experiences that will result in students' development of optimal levels of clinical competency as well as active, versus passive, involvement as member of the profession. The purpose of this paper is to provide readers with a description of the evolution of optional research team experiences with masters level counselor trainees and the outcomes of such activities.

The Research Team

The Masters Counseling Program

The 48-hour, state-accredited program, housed within a large Midwestern, state, university located within the Midwest Region, has two distinct emphases: School and Community Counseling. Twenty to 25 students are admitted each year during the Fall semester which maintains a stable total enrollment of approximately 40-45 counselor trainees. Most of the trainees are female and White having an average age of 25 years. There is currently no thesis option and until the time of the research team opportunities in the program, there was no opportunity for research or scholarship of any kind.

The Research Team Leader(s)/Participants

Both of the faculty members leaders of the team are African American females. The first, a tenured Associate faculty member, initiated the team experience in the masters program, while the other assumed co-leadership as a new faculty, tenure-track Assistant faculty member, during the third year of the training opportunity. Both have Ph.D. degrees in Counseling Psychology. The role of faculty is to pull together materials for the research team orientation, develop a list of well-defined expectations, schedule and attend team meetings, provides opportunities and guides

participants in the development of meaningful and 'doable' research questions, and to oversee the development of all final products and decide the forum in which products will be presented.

Team members who were a part of the first year research team experience in the masters program and who are currently in the doctoral program in Counseling Psychology have assumed leadership as role-models and experienced guides for the masters level trainees. Doctoral level trainees, who have been advisee of the senior faculty member, have served in this role from the onset. There have been a total of five doctoral level participants who have assisted in activities such as the research team orientation, writing, data analysis, and served as general consultants and support agents for the masters level trainees. These doctoral trainees, two Latinas, one Asian male, and two White males, have made important contributions to the overall experience.

It is important to note that research team leaders are leader/participants and actively involved in the development of all ideas and final generated by all topic-focused groups that evolve within the team. Consequently, the leadership roles are very time consuming in that leaders are an integral part of the functioning of each of the topic-focused groups within the overall team. For example, during the development of a team at the beginning of the year, several topic areas of interest will evolve. All leaders contribute significantly in some way to each of the topic groups in addition to the overall functioning of the research team experience. Given that most of the masters level trainees are novices to research, considerable oversight and guidance is required. This model allows for the sharing of this enormous responsibility across a number of individuals.

The Structure of the Research Team Experience

The first decision that was made by faculty was the selection of research team participants. An open door policy for participation was selected in order to provide the opportunity for all

trainees who were interested in the activities. To only provide opportunities for participating faculty advisees can result in a negative training environment wherein some students feel ignored or shortchanged based on advisor assignment that was typically based on chance. In addition, selecting trainees based on experience and having shown evidence of competency in research would not be meaningful with this student population wherein almost all have had limited and no experience in research. In fact, the few who reported experience had only engaged in data collection or data input for a faculty member. In neither case was their contribution perceived as warranting authorship. Given that the primary agenda of research team development for the masters trainees was to provide the opportunity for experience and the strengthen current vitae, the 'free for all' notion was adopted.

Research team meetings were 2-3 hours each, regularly scheduled and had an agenda of what would be addressed during the session. The first was an orientation for introductions and presentation of an overview of the requirements/guidelines for participation: attendance to team and small group meetings, personal accountability in task completion, personal assessment of available time commitment, and the reasons for participating in the experience. Subsequent meetings were committed to activities such as: generation of potential research group topics; assisting research groups in the identification of the research questions to be examined; authorship and authorship order issues; providing guidelines for the development of article annotations; providing models and guidelines for the structure of a research manuscript; measure selection and selecting appropriate data analysis procedures; presentation proposal development; the development of method sections toward the application for human subjects approval; resolving team conflicts and confusion; group oral paper presentations to the entire group for questions and

reactions; etc. Groups held work meetings outside of the regularly scheduled meetings which were used to complete tasks required for attendance to the whole team meetings.

Over a 4-year period, two types of research team structures evolved. Model 1, the simplest model to oversee, focuses on faculty members' preexisting data sets. A number of research questions with related method of data collection, and data sets are presented to trainees as options from which they might choose to develop. Research groups are formed around each of the data sets and participants are expected to become familiar with the literature by engaging in a literature review and developing hypotheses regarding the outcomes of pending data analyses and the implications of the findings. Group members develop the draft of proposals for presentations at conferences as well as the first draft of the final paper to be presented. Faculty members were responsible for guiding the development and writing of all sections of the manuscripts and served as editors making the final revisions prior to submission for research or conference presentation. This model of research team is considered fast track participation which requires no generation of research questions, selection of measurements, application for human subjects approval, data collection, and data analysis. Model one was used the first 3 years of the training program.

Model 2, the slow tract model, first implemented this academic year, guides participants through all stages of research from beginning to end. Students bring to the table their personal interests and curiosities related to counseling and are exposed to those of others in a brainstorming activity. After a number of topic areas are generated, students form groups based on shared interests. This models requires all of the activities of the first, but also includes the more complex, less predictable and more time-consuming aspects of research (i.e., agreement on area to be studied within a topic area, selection of standardized measures of variables of interest to individual research groups, application human subjects approval, data analysis, etc.). This

model requires a greater time commitment from both student and faculty participants. With students having to assume greater responsibility, it became a necessity that faculty also provide more guidance and involvement, and overall more time is needed for brainstorming and attending to the problem to be studied, and the interpersonal glitches that can occur when less experienced trainees are put in the position to assume greater responsibility. All activities must be more carefully monitored and supervised. Faculty are required in this model to not only provide support, encouragement, and validation, but to also challenge students to engage in difficult conversations with peers about issues related to accountability in fulfilling responsibilities, and, facilitate interpersonal problem resolution that did occur among group members. Model 2 seemed to result in these research trainees exhibiting many of characteristics observed among Level 1 Counselor trainees who are characterized by a primary focus on themselves, the inability to accommodate numerous characteristics and information incongruent with past experiences, and the heightened anxiety (Stoltenberg, McNeill, Delworth, 1998). Greater expectation to assume responsibility required that faculty respond accordingly in order for task completion to occur in a manner that maintained the collaborative and optimistic spirit among research team members. This seemed to require what the supervision literature has coined the need for a balance of 'support and challenge' in counseling supervision. Though this phrase was specifically related to counseling supervision, it might be very applicable with the supervision of research trainees in Model 2 training experiences.

Given that formal evaluation of the experiences will not be done until the end of this academic year, the authors, at this point, cannot fully attribute these differences solely to the model implemented. Masters student cohorts might have been distinctly different in a number of ways (i.e., person variables) that have nothing to do with research. Given that Model 1 was

implemented during a stage in the development of the research team concept within the program when participation was lower, increased numbers in participation during the implementation of Model 2 might have resulted in increased anxiety which might have also increased the potential for interpersonal conflict and competition among trainees.

In the following section, characteristics of the study body as well as that of the research team membership will be presented. Research team membership outcomes such as the number of presentations, the number of journal publications, the number of doctoral applicants, and doctoral admissions will be addressed.

Results

The total population of first year cohorts admitted to the program by gender, race, and ethnicity over the four year period (1995-1999) during the implementation of the research team training experience included a total of 94 students of which 75 were White (80 %), 8 (9%) were Black, 9 (10%) were Asian, and 2 (2%) were Hispanic. Of this population, 70 (74%) were women and 24 (26%) were men.

Thirty-four students (36%) out of the total student population volunteered to participate in the experience. Of these, 65% (n = 22) were female and 25% (n = 35) male; 59% (n = 34) were White; 26% (n = 9) were Black; 11% (n = 4) Asian; and 3% (n = 1) Hispanic.

All partitipants were co-authors of papers that were either presented as poster sessions or symposium presentations at a regional professional conference. A total of 17 presentations, including this year's activities, resulted. All resulting manuscripts were submitted and approved for distribution by ERIC. Eight team members were co-authors of 4 journal articles published in national refereed journals. All other papers are either currently being reviewed or in the stated of being revised in order for resubmission.

Ten (29%) of the research team members successfully applied for and have been admitted to doctoral programs accredited by the American Psychological Association. Five (50%) were White, four (40%) were Black, and 1 (10%) was Asian; 50% (n = 5) male and 50% (n = 5) female. All participants that applied, except one, was admitted upon first application. This student who was not admitted for doctoral training had only applied to one program and intends to reapply next year. Among non-participants during this period of time, only three trainees have been admitted to doctoral programs. In addition, the most senior doctoral-trainee team leader has since completed his doctoral degree and has been appointed as an Assistant Professor at a very prestigious University in South Korea.

Table 1 presents student level of involvement in the research experience over the 4-year period. Overall, there has been a trend of increased participation. Readers must note that the opportunity was only offered to those students who were most recently admitted during the Fall of 1995, whereas during subsequent years, all students had the option to be involved. During the first year, 21% of the class participated; 25% of the second class; 33% of the third class; and 39% of the fourth year. Though there was a trend for students to only participate during the first year of enrollment, some of the students did choose to participate both years.

Discussion

As in all doctoral level training programs, though not to the same degree, research and professional development is considered to be a critical component of training for masters level trainees. In the area of research, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (1994) requires accredited programs to have curriculum that expose students to: basic types of research methods, basic parametric and nonparametric statistics; principles, practices, and applications of needs assessment and program evaluation; uses of computers for data management and analysis; and ethical and legal consideration in research. To make sure trainees received a comprehensive orientation to the profession of counseling, CACREP notes the need to students to understand the: history of the helping professions; professional roles and functions including similarities and differences with other types of professional; professional organizations; ethical standards of the American Counseling Association and related entities, ethical and legal issues, and their applications to various professional activities; professional preparation standards, their evolution, and current applications; professional credentialing including certification, licensure, and accreditation practices and standards, and the effects of public policy on these issues; and, public policy process including the role of the professional counseling in advocating on behalf of the profession and its clientele.

However, three key points must be noted that distinctly differ between masters level trainees' experiences and experiences within doctoral training programs. First, even in the description of these two curricular domains, research and professional orientation, a primary practitioner orientation remains that leaves masters level trainees in the passive seat of taking in knowledge and implementing it with client populations without critical analysis and questioning.

Second, faculty within masters programs are not expected to provide trainees with supervised guidance that will increase their understanding the complexity of questions and examining existing mainstream ideology related to practice within the field. Third, their is a stark separateness that exists between the research domain and professional orientation that does not require an active participation in contributing to the existing literature nor rethinking what is currently 'common knowledge', which we well know changes periodically. It appears that in many cases, professionals with masters degrees are assumed to be technicians who use the knowledge and skills acquired, but are not assumed to take an active role in contributing to the ever changing face of counseling as a profession. This is very unlike what is expected of doctoral trainees who are encouraged and guided in the process of: professional organizational affiliation, professional networking, attending and presenting at professional conferences, developing publishable papers, and thinking critically about the applications and limitations of current literature. Doctoral degreed professionals have these training experiences even though most of them, too, will also engage in service delivery to clients, though to far fewer clients than masters level professionals.

Given the results of this experience, the authors believe that traditional training experiences within masters level counseling programs must be expanded beyond the boundaries of current CACREP guidelines to include a model that more closely approximates that of current doctoral program in terms of the development of research competency. This is only one means of facilitating 'research mindedness' among masters level trainees. The next step is for authors to examine the influence of research team involvement on counselor self-efficacy. Though the connection is presumed in the introduction, empirical examination of the relationship is strongly recommended.

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Table 1.

Student level of research team participation over the 4-year period by year of enrollment in the program.

Academic Year	1st Year Students	2nd Year Students	3rd Year Students*	Total
95 - 96	8/21	0/17	0	8/38
	38%	0		21%
96 - 97	9/24	2/20	0	11/44
	38%	10%		25%
97 - 98	4/22	10/20	0	14/42
	18%	50%		33%
98 - 99	14/26	3/20	2/3	19/49
	54%	15%	66%	39%

Periodically students take more than 2 years for program completion.